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ABSTRACT

The grading standard of the Language Skills Center at the State University of New York (Geneseo) has been adapted from the Diederich-French-Carlton Composition Scale and is designed so that instructors may respond objectively to student writing in six important areas: ideas; organization; vocabulary; sentence structure; punctuation; and capitalization. In addition, the scale is divided into two main concerns. The two parts of the scale complement each other and stress, first, the communication of ideas and the reactions to those ideas and, second, the editing and revision of the essay for the niceties of conventional grammar. For the writer the scale provides an objective, clearly defined editorial voice which pinpoints concrete areas of strengths and weaknesses that can be readily comprehended. The instructors retain their humanistic approach, but the response is supported by obvious and understandable guidelines which suggest a common and shared method of effective communication recognized by both instructor and student. The main advantage of freshman testing using a writing sample scored on an analytical scale is the feedback provided: when a student enters the classroom, instructors (using the six categories) know what his or her writing weaknesses are. Another advantage is the practice of reading in pairs, which helps cut down on reader fatigue and ensures more objective grading. The only disadvantage is the cost and time involved to rate the papers; on balance, however, this method effectively identifies students with writing difficulties and provides direction for their instruction. (MG)

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A PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVE TO HOLISTIC GRADING: ONE PROVEN METHOD

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A Practical Alternative to Holistic Grading:

One Proven Method

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HISTORY-

Geneseo's Language Skills Center was created in 1977 by the Vice President for Academic Affairs. The initial testing of freshman was arranged before the staff was hired, and students were registered into classes by either a low SAT Verbal--450 or below, or a low score on the TSWE, Test of Standard Written English. High SATs were automatically exempted. As we taught that first year, we discovered what many other writing teachers already knew--that there was not much in the way of correlation between SATs, short answer, machine scored tests, and what our students seemed able or not able to write. Then the three of us started thinking. We had two basic questions about our testing. What did we need and how could we use it later? We gave first day diagnostic writings, which wasn't too bad as we started with only seven sections, then worked frantically to get all the results back in time for the "drop and add" period. We were grading this first day on an analytic scale, a scale designed to select only the students we felt needed work prior to entering the freshman composition course. By the time we felt satisfied with the scale, it did, indeed, point out those in need of a first course. Along the line we have made changes, but it is still a close cousin to our seventies's scale. Its greatest advantage to us is that we can use the scale for all of our

evaluations: freshman orientation testing, regular classwork, and exit testing. Beyond the first day of orientation, students have no surprises. Students can and do come in unannounced and anyone on the staff can instantly go over their papers with them--it is all there, the paper and the individual record sheet with the raters' summary. No instructor needs to have read the paper prior to conferencing with the student; we all use the same criteria.

Last summer we tested 1,256 freshmen during the month of July. By mid August, our classes were filled, letters out to the students, the advisors, and to the permanent files. We have sixteen sections with fifteen students in each (sometime that creeps over a bit--eighteen is a disaster--). Our course is called Process of Writing, and that is exactly what the class is--the student starts at the beginning, builds up a folder of materials, writes and rewrites until midterm, at which time we add editing to our routine. Always trying to impress upon the students the recursive nature of writing, we continue to add to the folder, continue to revise and rewrite and start again as we edit. When you study the two pages of criteria (the before midterm and after midterm pages) along with our syllabus, you will see how integrated an operation this course is.

GRADING STANDARD

The Language Skills Center's grading standard has been adapted from the Diederich-French-Carlton Composition Scale and is designed so that instructors may respond objectively to student writing in six important areas: Ideas, Organization, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, and Punctuation and

Capitalization. In addition, the scale is divided into two main concerns. The first half deals with strengths and weaknesses in content and development of ideas. This part of the scale is given to the students at the beginning of the semester, and the writers are urged to concentrate at first on the ideas presented in their essays and on organization. Not overly worried about mechanics, students focus their attention on testing their work for "a controlling thesis," "thought-provoking" presentation, and supporting material which "flows logically." In each category a score of four represents the highest achievement; a score of one, the lowest. (Please read first half of the scale.) Vocabulary is added near midterm so that the students' grades are based on the first three areas, with 12 being the highest attainable score.

After midterm, the second half of the scale is presented, and the students are asked then to add to their concerns the mechanics of writing. The sentence structure criteria are not so much focused on style as they are on common, major errors that interfere with communication and which can lead, in turn, to weak writing. (Please read second half of the scale.) The two parts of the scale, therefore, complement each other and stress, first, the communication of ideas and the reactions to those ideas and, second, the editing and revision of the essay for the nice ties of conventional grammar. The scale is complete, and the highest score is now 24.

The scale provides for the writer an objective, clearly defined editorial voice which pinpoints concrete areas of

strengths and weaknesses that can readily be comprehended. The wording of the scale, for the most part, is directive and allows the writers to understand immediately what is happening within their essays. The instructors retain their humanistic approach, certainly, but that response is supported by obvious and understandable guidelines which suggest not a willy-nilly fight of prejudice on the instructors' part but a common and shared method of effective communication recognized by both instructor and student. The scale, then, is another voice for the instructor and, in a real sense, another teacher for the student.

BSK 100

SHAPING THE WRITING FOR COMMUNICATION

IDEAS

4 A controlling thesis is clearly stated and supported by relevant details. Ideas are solid and thought provoking.

3 Although the thesis is clearly stated and supported by relevant details, the ideas are somewhat banal and thus less thought provoking.

2 The thesis is too general and is not fully developed. Examples are inadequate or irrelevant, or they are not unified by a controlling thesis.

1 Thesis is hard to identify, or essay makes no sense at all. Essay does not address assigned topic.

ORGANIZATION

4 Essay begins well, flows in a logical manner from one idea to the next, and ends conclusively. Appropriate transitions maintain a clear and consistent relationship among parts of the essay, and the whole is unified.

3 Essay has a clear beginning, middle and end, but thesis statement, topic sentences and supporting details are not entirely focused. Paragraphing is logical, but clear transitions are not always provided.

2 Some plan or pattern is attempted in the essay, but focus is diffuse and the logic of the order is not immediately clear. Thesis statement, topic sentences and supporting details are haphazard, and the few transitions do not adequately create unity. Essay lacks balance.

1 The essay is formless, with no logical sequence or plan evident. Weak or non-existent paragraphing, few or no transitions.

VOCABULARY (includes all look alikes and sound alikes)

4 Words are used accurately and perceptively and are also appropriate to the topic. Wording is fairly sophisticated and promotes interest. No misuse of any word.

3 Words are used accurately, but are less sophisticated, reflect less insight, or are in a more conventional setting. No more than 2 misuses of words.

2 Wording is fairly accurate, but repetitious and predictable. No more than 4 misuses of words.

1 Elementary, colorless vocabulary or 5 or more misuses.

BSK 100

COMPLETING THE WRITING
(Editing)

SENTENCE STRUCTURE (Grammar and style; including gross errors such as run-ons, comma splices, fusions, fragments, verb agreement, verb tense, pronoun errors, short and choppy sentences, repetitive style, awkward and convoluted constructions)

4 Sentence constructions are varied and, when appropriate, complex. Style is smooth and promotes interest and comprehension. No gross grammatical errors.

3 Sentence constructions are usually correct but ordinary and relatively unvaried. Style is basically smooth, but sentences are not very sophisticated. One gross error possible.

2 Above criteria apply, but with no more than three gross errors.

1 Sentence constructions are elementary and monotonous. Frequent gross errors.

SPELLING

4 No errors.

3 No more than three different misspellings.

2 No more than five different misspellings.

1 More than five different misspellings.

PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION

4 No errors.

3 One to two different types of errors.

2 Three to four different types of errors.

1 Five or more different types of errors.

(As S in BSK 100 is achieved by submitting all assignments, rewriting when necessary, and earning--without any rewrites--an average of 17 points or more on the two post-tests and 17 points or more on the final typed paper.)

METHODOLOGY

The staff of the Language Skills Center has devised record sheets which provide space for detailed analysis of essays. Forms used by students enrolled in the course differ slightly from those adapted for all-freshman testing. Individual records are prepared for each student; they offer precise feedback and serve as editorial guides. When screening incoming freshmen, raters transcribe comments on record sheets which provide multiple listings and compose the Center's permanent files.

Essays submitted during orientation are alphabetized, entered on record sheets, and separated as well as identified by test date and time. Assessment begins when the first session's papers are in order. No information about students is available at this time. Essays are read blindly, and evaluation is confined to skills exhibited in the samples provided.

Two individuals rate each paper. They operate as a team, with one person reading aloud while the other follows and records assessment data. Errors in vocabulary, sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are cited by either reader, with discussion between the two, if necessary, about the type of error or the category to which it belongs. Emphasis is placed on noting errors in mechanics during the reading process, for once these are recorded, they are acknowledged as well as treated and dismissed from the minds of the readers. Pauses for these notes are almost always brief--even fleeting. The process signals a divorce of grammar from ideas, and the intense focus on the thread of the essay is never sacrificed. Following the conclusion of each essay is a brief exchange between raters,

during which points for ideas and organization are assigned. Next, scores earned in the remaining categories are identified. Both raters add an individual's score, checking for accuracy, and record the total next to the student's name. Later, addition is checked again, usually by a work-study student.

Test scores are then transferred to a master list of incoming freshmen and subsequently entered into the computer so that the college writing requirement for each student is identified and secured. Results of the test are also reported to three parties: the student, the student's advisor, and academic advisement. Computer-generated labels, bearing identifying information, are affixed to appropriate form letters which waive or require the Process of Writing. From this point, academic advisement supervises student registration for the course.

The significant task of the procedures outlined is the rating process itself. Although no fixed time comes to mind when attempting to estimate productivity, the steady pace established once reading begins is recalled. Papers may vary in length, quality, and coherence; handwriting can cause delays. On occasion, as many as fifteen papers can be read in an hour. At other times, one paper may demand thirty minutes' attention. Yet, movement from one paper to another is automatic and smooth, for purpose is unwavering. Thus, marked progress is always visible because of the steady reduction in the number of papers to be read.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

The main advantage of freshman testing using a writing sample scored on an analytical scale is the feedback provided. With the six categories of Ideas, Organization, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, Spelling, and Punctuation and Capitalization, we know when the student enters our class, specifically what his writing weaknesses are. Since classroom grading uses this same scale, the student knows at all times what areas in his writing need work. In addition to the classroom use of the score breakdown, we are also able to provide the student, parent, or advisor with detailed information as to why he has been placed in the Process of Writing. Often, a student has a more positive attitude about taking the course after we have shown him a detailed analysis of his test score.

Another advantage to our testing method is the practice of reading in pairs, which helps to cut down on reader fatigue. The reinforcement each rater gives the other makes scoring fifty papers much less tedious than if done alone. In addition, having two people share the evaluation process at the end of the course by team grading students' post tests insures more objective grading; the teacher is not the only judge of his/her students' writing.

The only disadvantage of our testing method is the cost and time involved to rate the papers. The personnel costs average approximately $5,000 a year for four people, and the testing and scoring take about one month. We can score between fifty and seventy-five papers per day, depending the quality of students' writing and the legibility of their penmanship. Papers graded

holistically could be rated more quickly although some methods require each paper to be evaluated separately by two readers. This would increase reading time considerably. Also, even with the less time-consuming holistic method, it is doubtful a rater could read and score many more than seventy-five papers per day and still have a high degree of accuracy. Of course, the most economical method of testing is with short answer, machine-scored tests; however, since research tells us these tests measure only test taking ability and not writing, their use would be a false economy.

Finally, when weighing the positive and negative aspects of our testing method, we have found it to be the most appropriate for our needs. It effectively identifies students with writing difficulties and provides direction for their instruction.